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RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 4307
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RUEHMN/AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO 6064
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO 6926
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO 1702
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RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN 0034
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 LA PAZ 000066

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/15/2019
TAGS: PGOV PREL PINR OFDP VN IS VT BN
SUBJECT: EVO BREAKS RELATIONS WITH ISRAEL; ATTACKS VATICAN

REF: A. 07 LA PAZ 2671
 1B. 07 LA PAZ 2566

Classified By: A/EcoPol Chief Joe Relk for reasons 1.4 (b)(d)

11. (C) Summary: President Evo Morales announced January 13 that Bolivia would break relations with Israeli, although the Israeli Honorary Consul told us he is still waiting for a formal notification from the Foreign Ministry. Morales also claimed he would charge Israel with war crimes at the International Criminal Court and railed against the Catholic Church at a diplomatic event, following an obvious attempt on the part of the new Holy See Nuncio to send out an olive branch. The Israeli Honorary Consul tells us there has been no violence against Israeli or Jewish property or persons in Bolivia due to Gaza violence, but that he never-the-less canceled a trip by the Ambassador, who resides in Lima and shares responsibility for Peru and Bolivia, the first week of January. According to the Consul, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez sent an envoy to Jerusalem January 13 to discuss opening diplomatic relations by another name, giving him hope a similar backtrack may be in the offing for Bolivia. End Summary.

Morales Breaks Relations; Taking Israel to Court for Gaza

12. (U) Bolivian President Evo Morales announced January 14 that Bolivia has broken diplomatic relations with Israel: "Bolivia used to have diplomatic relations with Israel, but in the face of these facts of grave acts against life, humanity, Bolivia breaks diplomatic relations with Israel." Morales announced this decision at the annual presidential reception for accredited diplomats. Morales explained that any state may present a case against actors in crimes against humanity and genocide in the International Criminal Court and that Bolivia would bring charges against Israeli President Simon Peres and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. Morales also called for Simon Peres' Nobel Peace Prize to be taken away.

Israeli Consul: "We Were Waiting for Them to Blast Us"

¶3. (C) Israel does not have an Ambassador in La Paz, but is instead represented by Walid Mansur, Ambassador to Peru who is also accredited to Bolivia. Local Honorary Consul Roberto Nelkenbaum, who was also interviewed on national TV, told PolOff late January 13 that he had "still not received anything official from the MFA" and that "no one at the MFA appears to have known this was going to happen," although "we were waiting for them to blast us." He conceded having "no idea" how the Morales rant will play out, but suspected there might be room for the Bolivians to backtrack as "there is really not much here" to cut back on and both the La Paz and Santa Cruz Israeli Honorary Consul staffs were exclusively composed of Bolivian nationals. He cited relatively large amount of student exchanges and the more than 2,000 Israeli tourists a year in Bolivia as motivation to reconsider.

Chavez Allegedly Steps Back on Israel, Will Evo Follow?

¶4. (C) Nelkenbaum also explained Ambassador Mansur told him that although the break in relations was "no surprise after Venezuela (expelled the Israeli Mission in Caracas)," but that if Bolivia follows the Chavez playbook, Morales may be following "symbolic" rhetoric with rapprochement. Mansur allegedly told Nelkenbaum that Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez sent a delegation to Jerusalem January 13 to negotiate a new relationship that would function as a diplomatic relationship, but without calling it that. Nelkenbaum suggested Chavez may be looking for something along the lines

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of a commercial and/or consular attaché with a smaller staff, but performing the same functions as a full mission.

Monkey See, Monkey Do Talk Not Helpful

¶5. (C) Nelkenbaum commented that Opposition Senate President Oscar Ortiz's description of Morales as "the little ape," who is only copying the behavior of "the big ape," Hugo Chavez, was "probably not helpful." Instead, Nelkenbaum preferred thoughtful analysis criticizing the break in relations or silence.

No Significant Gaza-Related Backlash, Yet

¶6. (C) Nelkenbaum claimed there had been no reports of attacks on Israeli or Jewish places or persons related to the Gaza violence or Morales, comments to date, although members of La Paz's Jewish community had complained about an upturn in anti-Israeli, anti-Semitic graffiti. Nelkenbaum canceled a January 6-7 visit by Mansur to Bolivia. Nelkenbaum said Gaza-related protests December 30 and January 5 (reftel a) prompted the decision, as his small office in a La Paz business building "has no security at all." Although Nelkenbaum said the marches stayed away from potential Israeli and Jewish targets, content to march around public squares, he never-the-less closed his offices January 5 and ¶6. Nelkenbaum discounted the prior protests as sparsely-attended poor emulations of the Caracas protests, without popular support, with few Palestinians, and organized "by the Egyptian car dealer just down the street." He said he doubted the government is financing or organizing the protests directly, because they have "bigger things to worry about," such as the January 25 constitutional referendum and recent conflict with the Catholic Church, a fight he felt the government would lose.

¶7. (U) Another La Paz march is planned for January 15 "in support of the Palestinian resistance." The march is being organized by local groups including Lucha Socialista (Socialist Struggle, associated with the International Workers, League), the Islamic Cultural Foundation of Bolivia, and other social movements. Press reports January

14 showed earlier protests with posters showing a dead child, presumably a victim of the violence in Gaza.

¶18. (C) Nelkenbaum spoke passionately about the friendships between the Bolivian Jewish and Arab, largely Lebanese/Syrian, not Palestinian, communities that date back to emigrations at the end of World War II. He was more skeptical about recent arrivals from Iran. Nelkenbaum lamented the ever-dwindling population of Jews in Bolivia, largely due to youth going overseas to Israel or the United States for education and not coming back. Once as many as 3,000 in La Paz during the 1960s, he estimated there were only about 200 Jews left in La Paz, 400 in Santa Cruz, and 40 in Cochabamba, with only about five Israeli expats or dual citizens nation-wide.

Holy See Tries to Calm the Waters

¶19. (U) As the newest diplomat accredited to Bolivia and per tradition, Vatican Nuncio, Jean Batista di Quatro, spoke first at the diplomatic event. Di Quatro expressed innocuous and positive comments about working with the Morales Administration to move forward in the New Year with common goals of poverty reduction and political inclusiveness. His only remotely critical comment was that the Vatican "will pray for you, if you allow us," a veiled reference to Morales' recent contention that the Catholic Church in Bolivia should refrain from making political comments in

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general and particularly taking stands that favor opposition positions.

Morales Keeping it Real by Blasting the Church

¶10. (C) President Morales followed these relatively benign comments with a blasting critique of the Church in Bolivia. Although Morales acknowledged the Church's efforts supporting "social justice," Morales also said he was compelled "to be frank" about the Church's relationship with the government. Morales complained bitterly about Bolivian Cardinal Julio Terrazas' alleged description of Bolivia as "a state ruled by narco-traffickers." (Note: In fact, Terrazas said he was concerned that the current socio-political trajectory could lead to a narco-state. Reftel b. End Note.) Morales likened Terrazas' statements to characterizations of him as a narco-trafficker he claimed the U.S. State Department had used in the past, inferring some kind of U.S. control over the Catholic Church's speaking points and politics. Morales also accused the Church of denying the existence of slavery in the Chaco region.

Meanwhile, Inside the Receiving Line ...

¶11. (C) While moving through the perfunctory receiving line at the diplomatic event, Charge' attempted to wish President Morales a Happy New Year and say "I hope relations will improve in the new year." Morales, however, cut him off at "I hope relations will improve" and, smiling, completed the sentence "with Obama." Vice Foreign Minister Hugo Fernandez later told Charge' that the first he had heard of the break in relations with Israel was during Morales' speech.

Comment:

¶12. (C) Somewhat surprisingly, Morales did not single out the United States for attack, content to focus his vitriol on the Vatican and Israel. Except for explaining his personal consternation and pain, Morales' Gaza and Israel comments were awkwardly read from a script. We wonder if the script was drafted in part or wholly by the Iranian "cooperation" delegation, which left yesterday. End Comment.

